

## REVIEW: EMINENT BUDDHIST WOMEN

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Tsomo, Karma Lekshe (ed). 2014. *Eminent Buddhist Women*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press. 278. Preface, introduction, index. ISBN: 978-1-4384-5130 (paperback, 29.95USD).

*Eminent Buddhist Women* edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, is in part the product of the 2010 Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women convened in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The chapters feature narratives about exceptional Buddhist women, contributing to the growing genre of literature on female Buddhist figures. The stated aim of the collection is to make visible women's contributions to Buddhism within multiple traditions.

The volume is organized geographically into five sections with twenty chapters. These chapters feature Buddhist women in South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, the Tibetan cultural region, and the West. The essays vary from translations with commentaries, to first person narratives told in the style of Buddhist hagiographies, to ethnographic accounts and oral histories. The editor made a deliberate decision to present heterogeneous narrative forms in order to recount a variety of narratives:

The considerable variation in these stories reflects the vast and varied range of experience in the lives of Buddhist women. Rather than homogenize these women's stories and experiences into a preconceived generic template or superimpose successive waves of feminist analysis, I have chosen to respect and retain as much as possible, the narrative choices of those who tell the stories (5).

Each chapter contains elements of local political and religious history interwoven with the narratives, providing a broad exposure to diverse Buddhist contexts and gender issues that weave them together. The result is an easy-to-read text that lends itself well to an undergraduate introductory Buddhism or Buddhism and gender courses with supplementary readings to outline the larger theoretical frameworks and historical contexts.

The work begins with an introduction by Karma Lekshe Tsomo who connects the text to a modern movement for women's Cape, Kali. 2016. Review: *Eminent Buddhist Women*. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 40:499-506.

rights in Buddhist religion:

A revolution is currently under way in Buddhist societies to upset the myth of women's inherent inferiority and to rescind the restrictions placed on women as a consequence of their imposed second rate status (7).

The introduction by the editor sets the stage for the range of narratives in the text. Tsomo begins the text by questioning gendered assumptions in the notion of "eminence," of historical figures. The narrative of Mahāpajāpatī, the first Buddhist nun, is cast in terms of feminist activism as "one of the earliest recorded instances of what today is termed feminist advocacy" (14). The editor highlights the importance of recovering lost histories in order to provide a tribute to women's contributions and achievements. She points out that the documentary potential for recording Buddhist women's narratives is higher than ever before. These comments set the stage for some of the oral histories recounted in the text.

This movement for Buddhist women primarily engages the issue of female monastic ordination, though other concerns are also addressed. Tsomo outlines the history of these issues: A *bhiksuni* order - the first Buddhist nun's order - was established early on during the life of the Buddha, though its lineage was not continuous. Consequently, women's access to full ordination and higher education, such as the *geshe* degree, have come only through painstaking deliberate efforts on behalf of the movements' proponents (Havnevik 1990:45, 140).

Critics of the Buddhist women's movement have claimed that their agenda is initiated by Western Buddhist women and imposed upon Asian women based on Eurocentric ideals (38). This assertion is directly and repeatedly countered in the text. For example, Chapter Two 'Two Generations of Eminent Nepalese Nuns' by Punyawati Guruma features the stories of two nineteenth century Theravada nuns who established the first monasteries for women in Nepal. In another example, Chapter Three 'Brave Daughters of the Buddha: The Feminisms of the Burmese Nuns' by Cristina Bonnet-Acosta discusses methods of resistance that Burmese nuns use to improve their own circumstances. Bonnet-Acosta argues that the critique that the movement is a Eurocentric imposition on Asian women overlooks local forms of resistance and heterogeneity in feminist activism. She argues convincingly that the Burmese women in her study may not be associated with any feminist movement, nor invested in egalitarian ideals, yet they seek to improve their situation in order to overcome

limitations imposed upon them due to their female status:

While these forms of feminism develop strategies to improve the conditions of women in different parts of the world, they do so without resorting to an imitation of the Western ideals for women, and, as Mohanty explains, they are also often involved in critical examinations of the Eurocentric and colonial legacies that Western feminism carries with it (38).

The twenty chapters in this collection place it beyond the scope of a detailed chapter by chapter summary for the purposes of this review. However, five chapters stand out as examples of the types of narratives presented in the text. These are Chapter One ('My Sister's Future Buddhahood: A Jātaka of the Buddha's Lifetime as a Woman') by Karen Derris; Chapter Two (mentioned above); Chapter Twelve ('From Mountains to Metropolis: Sōn Master Daehaeng's Teachers on Contemporary Buddhist Practice') by Hyecheon Sunim that provides an example of both female asceticism and Buddhist modernization; Chapter Fourteen ('The Legacy of a Female Sikkimese Buddhist Teacher: The Lineage of Peling Ani Wangdzin and Gendered Religious Experience in Modern Sikkim') by Amy Holmes-Taghungdarpa featuring the female founder of a Sikkimese lineage of lay women; and Chapter Twenty ('What Is a Relevant Role Model? The Example of an Ordinary Woman Who Achieved Enlightenment') by Rita M Gross, which compares two types of female figures featured in Buddhist narratives.

Central to all the chapters is a heavy emphasis on social activism, institution building, ordination, and equal access to opportunities for spiritual growth. Chapter Two tells the story of two nuns in Nepal who established the first monasteries. Interwoven with their lives is the political context of Nepal in the twentieth century, when Buddhist practice was restricted by Hindu Rana rulers (31).

Chapter One offers a commentary and translation of a medieval Pāli text, the *Sotthakīmahānidāna*. This text describes the story of a princess who lived during the time of a buddha from a previous aeon, making it the only Theravadin narrative in which the Buddha was formerly female. The princess aspired to be reborn as a buddha, and the story centers around confirmation that this princess will be none other than Siddhartha Gotama, the historical Buddha. Two versions of the story appear in the text and are offered in translation in this chapter. Derris points out that both versions interweave elements of the story with the *Buddhavamsa*, the more

well-known canonical Pali hagiography of the Buddha. This is accomplished by presenting lifetimes that predate the *Buddhavamsa* stories, yet are connected to them.

After briefly introducing the genre of Jātaka tales, the stories of the Buddha's previous lives, Derris' analysis centers on two points of interest in the story: gender issues illustrated by the manner in which the prophecy is given and the re-envisioned etymology of the name of the Buddha.

A gender issue raised within the narrative is the status of women as viable candidates for future Buddhahood. Early Buddhists' vinaya literature detail that a male birth and a monastic status is a prerequisite to reach buddhahood (Havnevik 1990:142). In the Jātaka tales, a condition for attaining buddhahood is that one must be told by a living buddha that one will become a buddha in a future aeon. In other words, one must have received a prediction of future buddhahood from a living buddha. Furthermore, orthodox Pāli rules require that one who receives such a prediction must be male. Thus, Derris points out that the challenge posed in this Jātaka tale is that the princess as a woman could not receive such a prediction. The twist in the story occurs when the buddha of that aeon indirectly subverts the orthodox rules by making a prediction that the prediction will be made. Thus, this narrative serves as an example of resistance against gender discrimination in medieval Pali literature. Derris frames this as a form of discreet resistance.

While this narrative remains technically within the bounds of the Pāli orthodox rules governing who may receive a prediction, notably that the recipient of a prediction of Buddhahood must be male, it pushes as hard as possible against this by introducing a new category of prediction that his sister [the princess] will, in a future lifetime, receive a prediction of Buddhahood from a future Buddha (14).

This chapter also includes analysis of the princess' aspiration to be a future buddha named *Siddhattaakatela*. Derris argues that this is a literary device implying that the princess' story is the pivotal account that sets in motion Siddhartha's long journey. In other words, this implies that the aspiration of a *female bodhisatta* was the inception of the journey to Buddhahood. Since this chapter intertwines an analysis of this narrative in the context of gender issues in the vinaya, it gives a useful and pithy introduction to the basis of gender discrimination themes in Buddhist thought.

Chapters Three through Eight feature nuns from South Asia.

In Chapter Three, Bonnet-Acosta argues that in the case of Burmese nuns, previous works have

overlooked the heterogeneity within the community of nuns, and they do not adequately open a space to discuss the methods of confrontation and resistance that some groups of Burmese nuns have developed in order to improve their situation (36).

This chapter features an account of the first Burmese nuns to attain full ordination in Burma, which has the highest number of female monastics of any country (36). It also offers a discussion of transnational feminist theory and the work of an eminent nun in Burma, Sayalay Dipankara.

Chapters Nine through Twelve feature East Asian subjects. Chapter Twelve offers a striking example of positive contributions of rare narratives of women in Buddhism provided by this text. It highlights a form of understudied, non-institutional Buddhist practice, that of the itinerant female. It also documents efforts at modernization on the part of a female Buddhist leader. The chapter features the life of a twenty-first century Korean Sōn Master, Daehaeng, who made efforts to modernize the spread of Buddhism in relationship to the urbanization and Westernization of Koreans (143).

Daehaeng engaged in solitary contemplative practice in the wilderness for a decade. Hyeseon Sunim (Kyunhee Lee) describes Daehaeng's capacity for such practice as stemming from a childhood of disruption and homelessness, which led to deep questioning, becoming a novice nun, and retreating to the mountains (144). As with many of the chapters in the text, fascinating snippets of national and political histories in the period are seamlessly interwoven with narratives of individual subjects. For example, Daehaeng was sometimes bullied and beaten by strangers and even arrested and tortured by the police, who suspected her of being a North Korean spy (145). Later, after her long period of ascetic practice was complete, Daehaeng founded an urban center. Hyeseon Sunim (Kyunhee Lee) describes Daehaeng as an innovator and modernizer, citing examples of Daehaeng's translations, lay teachings, and adaptations of rituals for the sake of simplicity and attention to meaning.

The next section of the book contains chapters on women in the Tibetan Cultural region, including Sikkim, Tibet, and Mongolia. Chapter Fourteen is notable in highlighting a figure outside the major institutions and whose lineage was carried on by lay-people. The

understudied area of sub-altern figures in Tibet and the need for documentation of non-monastic religious activities makes this chapter stand out. Holmes-Tagchungdarpa writes of a female Sikkimese Buddhist teacher in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Pelling Ani Wangdzin (pad gling A ni dbang 'dzin) whose lineage is carried on predominantly by Sikkimese women.

The text is dominated by monastic figures. Seventeen chapters out of twenty feature monastic women. Thus, Chapter Fourteen offers a glimpse of another important facet of religious life in the Tibetan cultural region - that of non-monastic religious activity. Wangzin, the central character, founded a female lay lineage in Sikkim. Wangzin traveled alone on pilgrimage throughout the Himalayas and returned to Sikkim. In her teens she began to wear monastic robes (161), though the details of the circumstances of training and ordination are not known. During these travels, she met the Tokden Shakya Shri (rtogs ldan sakya shri 1853-1919), an early twentieth century Tibetan lama who wore the robes of an ordained Vajrayana practitioner (*snags pa*). Holmes-Tagchungdarpa explains that Pelling Ani Wangdzin specialized in teaching *nyungne* (*smyung gnas*), a fasting practice, and inner yoga practices (*rtsa rlung*) (162).

Wangdzin's context illustrates the status of women and ordination in Sikkim in this period:

Despite this relative equality, women are notably absent from religious institutions that help political and spiritual power in Sikkim prior to 1975. There are no records of nunneries earlier than the 1950's, when Tibetan refugees began to arrive from the north, and also no tradition of female monasticism, which explains the ambivalence regarding whether Pelling Ani Wangdzin really was ordained (164).

Holmes-Tagchungdarpa goes on to describe the ratio of female to male monastics in Sikkim - thirty-seven women associated with nunneries in comparison to 3,021 monks (164). She argues that these low numbers are due at least in part to the availability of a Sikkimese lay-religious movement such as that which stemmed from the groups that formed in connection with Wangdzin's activities: "It may well be that nuns are few in Sikkim because of the wide availability of other opportunities for women in the religious sphere" (164).

The study in this fourteenth chapter refers to *mani lhakhang* (*ma ni lha khang*), which are small local groups of women in the lineage of Pelling Ani Wangdzin. They carry out fasting, prayers, and

ritual practices connected to Avalokiteshvara (164). Holmes-Tagchungdarpa argues that this religious practice disrupts cultural gender norms for older women and correlates their presence to a subverting of hegemonic identities:

The contemporary legacy of Pelling Ani Wangdzin in Sikkim is an intriguing study of how traditional forms of religious practice and belonging in tribal India subvert other mainstream hegemonic imaginings of identity and community (165).

This chapter is profitably read alongside previous scholarly work by Vargas-O'Bryan (2001) who has focused on another female monastic, Gelongma Palmo (dge slong ma dpal mo), the founder of the *nyungne* fasting practice, which Vargas-O'Bryan frames as a gendered practice. Holmes-Tagchungdarpa does not analyze the connections between the two, although *nyunge* appears in various chapters and is referenced in the text. This compelling account of the *mani lhakhang* told by Holmes-Tagchungdarpa is another example of how *Eminent Women* provides a thorough introduction and rich starting point for a course exploring major themes of women in Buddhist history.

The final section of the book features two chapters on women in the West. In Chapter Twenty, Rita Gross' essay compares biographies of the eighth century Tibetan princess, Yeshe Tsogyel (*ye shes mtsho rgyal*), and the Nepalese Buddhist female, Orgyen Chökyi (1675-1879) (232). Written in the first person from the perspective of a female Buddhist practitioner, Gross argues for the importance of narratives of ordinary Buddhist women:

...Orgyen Chokyi is a more realistic role model than Yeshe Tsogyel precisely because she is more ordinary and because she suffered the same indignities of a difficult family situation and frustration over the liabilities of the female gender role that many of us suffer. She was ignored for much of her life and struggled for everything she ever achieved, including being able to record her own struggle. For much of her life she was very unhappy, something that resonates with many of us. Nevertheless, Orgyen Chokyi persevered and came to be regarded as someone who had attained Buddhism's goal of liberation from samsara despite all her obstacles. To me, she seems a lot more like I am than does Yeshe Tsogyal, and her very ordinariness is more encouraging to me than Tsogyel's impossibly fortunate circumstances (236).

After discussing issues of female role models and tokenism, Gross does not explicitly address the issues of hagiographical styles versus histories, biographies versus autobiography in Tibetan literature, and so on. However she does illuminate these issues by comparing and contrasting Yeshe Tsogyal and Orgyen Chökyi. This is useful reading to begin a conversation with students on comparing female role models in various types of narratives. In so doing, this chapter highlights the strength of this work as a whole in its offering of diverse formats of Buddhist life stories with assorted modes of presenting and framing those stories.

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*Eminent Buddhist Women* offers a varied array of narratives about Buddhist women that helps foster studies of gender issues across diverse Buddhist cultures. In positioning narratives of women from different cultures side by side, a valuable survey of Buddhist activity, politics, and religion is offered, highlighting gender disparities that they share. In providing narratives in a range of voices - from the academic analysis of texts, to translations and commentaries of literature, to the first person accounts of women within the tradition - an accessible text balancing narrative and academic overtones is provided. The subjects themselves provide a diversity of rarely documented female religious activity, enhancing understanding of marginalized, historically invisible people. *Eminent Buddhist Women* is thus an important contribution to the genre of literature on women in Buddhism, underscoring diversity in format, subject, and methodology. It provides a snapshot of a period in the history of the Buddhist women's movement and the diversity of contributors and concerns that inform it.

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